OPINION

RICH TOSCHES
Gazette
Metro columnist

Health care plan digs at roots of gay issue

Our village put itself on the Map of Intolerance in April when the City Council voted to stop paying health care premiums for same-sex partners of village employees.

Gays, lesbians and others were outraged. Some "religious" folks wore goofy victory smirks.

Today, the council will revisit the controversial issue with a watered-down plan. And soon, any housemate — gay, lesbian or Republican — of a city worker would be eligible for group rates on health insurance.

Group rates are about 50 percent cheaper than the individual rate unmarried partners of city workers now must pay.

The city, however, will bear none of the cost. Unlike the same-sex benefit plan, additional premiums would be paid by the employees.

Today, the council officially will look at the so-called "employee buy-in program."

It could get interesting.

That's because many of the eight members who did away with same-sex benefits said they did so strictly on economic grounds. The city couldn't afford it. They insisted it wasn't a moral issue.

Now, with the economic argument moot, we'll find out.

"If that was the argument," Councilman Jerry Heimlicher said of his colleagues, "then I don't understand how any of them could object to this plan."

Heimlicher voted to repeal same-sex benefits. He did it, he said, because it was unfair to straight people.

"Heterosexuals who live together and gays and lesbians who live together are not recognized as having a legal union," he said Monday. "But we were giving benefits to one of those groups, the gays and lesbians."

The lone dissenting voice on the council came from Richard Skorman. He said he was disgusted by the vote to kill same-sex benefits.

He doesn't feel much better about the new proposal.

"This would offer any true domestic partner, gay or not, a break on health care," he said. "But the employees pay for it from their own pockets."

Then Skorman got to the heart of the issue.

"Our religious groups might oppose it," he said. "They might say we should never cover any same-sex lover of a city employee. But I'm not sure they can say, as good Christians, that people who don't fit that category also can't have access to health care.

"I never knew what was so Christian about denying human beings health care, no matter who they are."

Rich Tosches' column appears Sunday, Tuesday and Friday. He can be reached at 636-0226 or tosches@gazette.com

City eyes insuring any in household

By ED SEALOVER
THE GAZETTE

Colorado Springs city workers moved a step closer Monday to being able to put parents, live-in adult children or same-sex partners on their insurance policies.

The City Council told City Manager Lorne Kramer to look into creating a "buy-in" policy that would allow employees to sign up household members other than spouses and children. The employee would be responsible for 100 percent of the insurance costs.

Some community members have groused that the plan, revealed earlier this month, is a back-door attempt to reinstate the same-sex benefits that were cut by the council in April. Those benefits angered many in the community and became a major issue in the April 1 election.

But the suggestion to examine the new proposal was made by Councilman Larry Small, a same-sex benefits opponent who said this could insure more people at no cost to taxpayers.

"I think we should do everything we can to make this effective for 2004," said Councilman Jerry Heimlicher, who also voted to eliminate same-sex benefits.

Kramer is scheduled to come back to council during October budget talks with a report on whether there are any hidden costs in the plan.

The idea was pitched to city officials recently by John Weiss, Colorado Springs Independent publisher, who worked on it with other residents.

Though details haven't been finalized, backers say recipients of the insurance benefits would have to live with an employee and be financially interdependent. This could help invalid adult children or parents younger than 65, as well as same-sex partners.

While it would not have a direct cost to the city, Mayor Lionel Rivera and Councilman Tom Gallagher were worried the new enrollees could cause problems for the roughly 1,300 other people on the city's self-insured system.

Gallagher said he'd like to require physical exams so extremely ill parents or children would not be added and send costs through the roof.

Rivera asked Kramer to survey other cities or companies with similar policies and find out if their employees' insurance costs rose.

"If the preliminary information says it will increase costs to the general fund by ($50,000 or $100,000), I won't support it," Rivera said.

Vice Mayor Richard Skorman, the only member of council who opposed eliminating same-sex benefits, backs the buy-in proposal.

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